

Chapter 80

Qatar's Educational Reform: Critical Issues Facing Principals

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ABSTRACT

Launched in 2004, Qatar's massive educational reform, Education for a New Era, has introduced numerous changes to the K-12 educational system forcing school leaders to face challenges and issues in their role of leading and managing the school community. This chapter reports the results of a qualitative research study that examines the critical issues K-12 principals face as they implement educational reform. Using semi-structured interviews, the voices of 20 principals are presented centering on the critical issues that have evolved during the reform and the skills and leadership styles necessary to address these issues that have shaped the Qatari educational reform. Discussion and recommendations are provided to assist educational leaders in similar contexts.

INTRODUCTION

Educational reform is a demanding task. There is little doubt that the assessment of a nation's educational system and the development of recommendations for reform is challenging. However, most of that work is on the theoretical level. The real challenge lies in the implementation of an educational reform and the recommendations because this moves the reform from the theoretical to the practical level and where most stakeholders are directly impacted by the reform. For many, the implementation of reform directly and significantly impacts their career and daily lives. This is certainly the case with principals. This chapter provides insights from principals who are in the midst of a massive educational reform in Qatar. The focus on the discussion centers on the critical issues principals face, the skills and leadership styles they believe are needed to specifically address important issues, how their particular context influences and or creates these issues followed by several recommendations that could be applied to similar reform contexts.

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BACKGROUND

In 2001, the country of Qatar became alarmed that the K-12 education system was “not producing high-quality outcomes and was rigid, outdated, and resistant to reform” (Brewer, et al., 2007, p. iii). Considering possible reform options prompted the government to approach RAND, a nonprofit research organization, that was assigned the task of conducting a comprehensive assessment of Qatar’s educational system and provide recommendations for building “a world-class system that would meet the country’s changing needs” (Brewer, et al., 2007, p. xvii). The conclusions of the assessment revealed a number of fundamental problems. First, the current system was highly centralized and had limited strategies for evaluation and monitoring of policies and processes. Second, there was a lack of communication and shared vision among educational stakeholders because of the rigid top-down decision-making policy process. Finally, it demonstrated that there was an over-emphasis on rote learning and little attention to the development of critical thinking.

Upon the completion of a comprehensive examination of the existing Qatari educational system, RAND presented three specific system-changing options to the Qatari leadership. These included:

(1) a Modified Centralized Model, which upgraded the existing, centrally controlled system by adding or improving the basic elements; (2) a Charter School Model, which decentralized governance and encouraged variety through a set of schools independent of the Ministry and that allowed parents to choose whether to send their children to these schools; and (3) a Voucher Model, which offered parents school vouchers so that they could send their children to private schools and which sought to expand high-quality private schooling in Qatar (Brewer, et al., 2007, p. xix).

The Qatari leadership decided to proceed with the Charter School Model that encourages parent choice, a partially decentralized governance and provided new school models. Under a new name, the Independent School Model, the new educational structure embodies the following characteristics:

1. Government Funded Schools
2. School Decentralization
3. Increased Accountability in Schools
4. Independent Monitoring of Schools
5. Government Evaluation of the System (Brewer et al., 2007).

As a result of RAND’s report, a systematic reform designed to convert Qatar’s schools into a competitive educational system known as *Education for a New Era* (EFNE) was initiated and is recognized as central to the development of the Qatari economy. EFNE was based on four principles: 1) autonomy for schools, 2) accountability through a comprehensive assessment system, 3) variety in schooling alternatives, and 4) choice for parents, teachers, and school operators. These principles represent a two-pronged strategy to reform requiring the establishment of government-funded Independent schools over a multi-year period and the implementation of annual assessments to measure student learning and school performance (Supreme Education Council, 2012).

EFNE not only introduced Independent schools but also established the Supreme Education Council (SEC) in order to guide education reform. The SEC has two main branches that deal with Independent schools—the Education and Evaluation Institute. The Education Institute recommends necessary financial

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